

HARVEY MINDESS

## Humor in Hawai'i: Past and Present

Ho, get tree good tings, dis book. Going make you tink,  
sometimes you going laugh, and da odda times going  
make you nene. Da haole buggah who wen write 'em  
no live heah, but. Bymbye we tell you what we tink a him.

Paul Ogata, e-mail message to author, 2005.

FOR READERS WHO don't live in the Islands, the language above is commonly called pidgin. It was created in the plantation era as immigrant workers endeavored to understand each other, and evolved into a language that local people enjoy to this day. Because the author of this study wasn't lucky enough to be raised in Hawai'i, he will try to avoid making a fool of himself by parading the little he knows now. All the Island comics he will quote, however, speak or spoke pidgin skillfully, so on the last page pidgin will be used to sum him up for da kine—his favorite phrase as it can mean anything at all.

In February, 1793, a distinguished British explorer, Captain George Vancouver, conducted an expedition to the Pacific. His ships made a memorable visit to the Kona coast of a tropical island that was to become known as the Big Island of Hawai'i. Although Captain

*Harvey Mindess, Ph.D. is a professor emeritus at Antioch University in Los Angeles. He is the author of several books on humor, has taught courses on the study of humor, and has given invited addresses on the subject at universities throughout the world. A frequent visitor to Hawai'i, he is intrigued by the role of ethnic humor in the Islands.*

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James Cook, who had visited the Islands 15 years earlier, had been killed there in a tragic encounter with Islanders, Vancouver's visit was entirely congenial.

It was the explorers' practice of the time to employ talented men to make drawings of the natives and their environs, as well as scribes to note their observations. Vancouver's mate, Thomas Manby, was such a scribe. In his notes, he wrote:

Before we became acquainted with these people, we considered them as a ferocious and turbulent set of savages. This character they are by no means entitled to, as they are mild and tractable. . . . To each other they are free, easy, and cheerful, and show more real good nature than I have seen in your better regulated societies. During the whole of my stay I was never witness to a quarrel. They delight in jokes, which were never known to produce an angry brow or uplifted arm.<sup>1</sup>

"They delight in jokes, which were never known to produce an angry brow . . ." When I read that sentence, I was hooked. As a long-standing humor scholar, I had been searching for examples of the humor of American ethnic groups in their early years; Jews in Biblical times, Irish when they were dominated by the British, and African Americans back in Africa. Now, out of the blue, I had learned that the early Hawaiians not only liked to play jokes on each other but enjoyed them more civilly than the civilized Brits.

To tell you in advance what you will soon see spelled out in detail, the Islanders' inclination to enjoy in-group humor has survived to this very day. Despite the moralistic influence of the New England missionaries who came to "civilize the natives" in the early 1800s, and the wave of "political correctness" that washed in from the Mainland in the late 1900s, Hawaii's easy-going spirit has never been stiffened into mere politeness. Present-day residents share a heritage of readiness to laugh at themselves, each other, and whomever or whatever they find funny.

My first exposure to that fact came in the 1980s when I attended a performance by Frank DeLima in Waikiki. A few visitors to the Islands, with no preconceived notion of how its ethnic groups got along, had been advised to see his show. What impressed us even before he appeared onstage was the racial diversity of his audience. Members of five or six ethnic groups, male and female, young and

old, awaited his entrance. Then suddenly, instead of emerging from a doorway or from behind a curtain, DeLima climbed clumsily onstage from a seat in the first row. Dragging a tablecloth caught in the zipper of his pants, he began his monologue with good-natured jibes at everyone's ethnicity, beginning with his own (Portuguese).

"What does it say at the top of a Portagee ladder?" "STOP!"

"Why did the Portagee water half of his lawn?" "He heard there was a fifty percent chance of rain."

Corny as those jokes may have been, DeLima's body language and facial expressions made us laugh out loud. Then he launched into his inspired songs and skits. Donning a Superman outfit to play "Pocho-man" (a Portuguese tough guy), he re-costumed himself in a sparkling green gown with padded boobs to play "Imelda", and to the tune of "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," sang, "I left my shoes in my Manila, I left my bra and panties too . . ." As if that weren't enough, he emerged with a cowboy hat, scarf and Texas drawl to represent the *haole* (Caucasians) who had moved to Honolulu; a skullcap, spectacles, and Chinese accent to conjure up a fussy Chinese businessman; and other Island types for good measure.

Accompanied by a three-piece band and two gifted slapstick actors, DeLima was at the top of his clowning career and admirable in his versatility. He left us all cheering, and also left me with the incentive to learn as much as I could about humor in Hawai'i: how it began, what it was like in the centuries before America annexed the Islands, and how it had evolved from then to the present.

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Beginning with what is known about the humor of the original Hawaiians, several books and articles have made it clear that word-play and riddling were savored as far back as their belief in demi-gods who ruled the world. In the *American Anthropologist*, Martha Beckwith wrote, "In Hawaiian stories of the ancient past, the contest of wit is represented as one of the accomplishments of chiefs . . . Such a wit-contest is called *hoopaapaa*, a word grandly translated by Andrews, Thrum, and others as "the art of disputation."

Ms. Beckwith listed over fifty ancient riddles that were collected in

Honolulu. Here are a couple: "*Ula o luna, ula o lalo, kawi mai ka oli.*" Red above, red below, with a cheerful call. Answer: Rooster. "*Kuu waa, he umi ihu.*" My double canoe has ten noses. Answer: Feet, with ten toes.<sup>2</sup>

While clever riddles are not really jokes, they depend upon sharp wit and wordplay. Their structure is similar to that of current puns, such as "Dijon vu—the same mustard as before," and "Shotgun wedding—a case of wife or death." It isn't stretching the evidence, therefore, to assume that early Hawaiians had not only the inclination, but also the wit, to create and appreciate clever humor.

Manulani Meyer, professor, University of Hawai'i at Hilo wrote:

Nane, or riddles, were part of everyday experiences for Hawaiians. We still honor people with these quick kine minds . . . When you live where we lived and continue to live, you are changed by the touch of a cool malanai breeze on a warm day. It has developed our disposition and encouraged joy to thrive and laughter to be part of our everyday discourse."<sup>3</sup>

Hawaiian word-play today comes in various forms. In the late 1900s, for example, one of the state's foremost comics, Andy Bumatai, taped a performance in which he delivered the following lines:

Chinese waiters, man, they think the whole world speaks Chinese. Did you ever try to get any help in a Chinese restaurant? 'Oh, excuse me, the lip yang ho, what is that?' 'De lip yang ho? Da de hum hup hot wi de hom ho hecow'.

In a similar standup performance, Frank DeLima enlightened his audience with, "Did you know that 85% of all Japanese men have Cataracts? The rest drive Rincolns." And to slip in a little word play in pidgin, "Don't make a fool of yourself" is rendered as, "No make ass!"

The early Islanders' enjoyment of risqué or lusty humor, too, is evident in their mythology. Maui the demi-god and Kamapua'a the pig-god were powerful figures who engaged in exploits not primarily to amuse, but whose adventures and deeds were met with both laughter and awe.

In her fascinating study, *A Legendary Tradition of Kamaʻpuaʻa, the Hawaiian Pig-God*, Professor Lilikalā K. Kameʻeleihiwa wrote:

Kamaʻpuaʻa, the Hawaiian Pig-God, is that ancient creature who roots on the deep black mud of the cool forest. . . . Defiant of all authority, bold and untamed, he recalls the pig nature that is dormant in most people. . . . Treacherous and tender, he thirsts after the good things in life—adventure, love, and sensual pleasure. . . . (As a human he excelled in making love to women, and as a pig he was best at making mischief . . .) Nowhere else in Polynesia is there evidence that a pig was worshipped as a god, and some maintain that nowhere else was devotion to sensual pleasure so exalted and refined as in Hawai'i.<sup>4</sup>

The first Americans to dedicate themselves to the task of converting Hawaiians to the worship of Christ were groups of Protestants from New England. Congregationalists led by Hiram Bingham spent more than 40 years in the early 1800s teaching the children, adults, and Island chiefs the Old and New Testaments and how good Christians are expected to conduct their lives here on earth.

By and large, they were remarkably successful, but their belief system was not accepted and taken to heart by everyone. Hawaii's great king, Kamehameha I, had united the Islands and created a dynasty that would rule them for more than a century. He was admired not only as a stalwart ruler, but also as a man with a deft sense of humor. According to Gavan Daws, author of *Shoal of Time*,

Several of his foreign visitors talked to him [Kamehameha] about the superior merits of the Christian God, and late in his reign he heard that the chiefs of Tahiti had become Christians, but in this as in most other matters Kamehameha was a practical man. As he said to one haole, he would need good evidence of the power of this god: if the Christian would jump off a cliff, Kamehameha would watch to see if his god saved him.<sup>5</sup>

If further evidence is needed that Hawaiians maintained their sense of humor during their conversion to Christianity, another event described in *Shoal of Time* should make it clear:

When the Russian Otto von Kotzebue visited Honolulu in 1816,

[his] naturalist, Adelbert von Chamisso was allowed to enter a heiau with the chiefs and priests, remain there throughout a kapu period, and watch the religious ceremonies. . . . What surprised him was the atmosphere of gaiety and merry making which, he said, was so extreme as to make a European masked ball look like a funeral. . . . He asked to inspect a feathered basket work image of a god, and when, curious, he ran his fingers over its teeth, the young man carrying it moved it suddenly to make it appear as if it had swallowed Von Chamisso's hand, and exploded in laughter when the naturalist pulled his arm back.<sup>6</sup>

Mormon missionaries came to the Islands in the 1850s and Episcopalians in the 1860s to join the Roman Catholics in diluting the influence of Calvinism. Christianity became a workaday religion and the Hawaiian Islands become a Christian nation. Mark Twain, visiting the Islands in the 1860s, concluded that "sin no longer flourished there "in name, but only in reality."<sup>7</sup>

From the 1850s through the 1890s, the likelihood of Hawai'i being annexed by Great Britain, France, or the United States became a major issue. As several full-blooded Hawaiian kings and queens came and went, the Islands' populace began to include large numbers of Europeans and Americans. Among them were influential figures who planned and plotted ways in which their country of birth could make this lovely land their own.

Hawai'i had also become a major source of raw material for the burgeoning sugar industry and, by the late 1890s, it was annexed by the United States. There were multiple reasons on both sides for creating that union, and sugar was one of the main ones. As sugar cane grew unattended on the Islands, so much money could be made by owning a plantation and selling the raw material to markets on the mainland, that one could live a life of luxury on that basis alone.

In the plantation era, the Islands housed thousands of recent arrivals from China, Japan, Portugal, Korea, and the Philippines, all of whom had come to work in the sugar cane fields. Most Americans and Europeans came to proselytize, acquire land, build factories, or establish businesses they believed would bring them fortunes.

The immigrant laborers who made the transference from cane to sugar possible, however, were not the ones who became wealthy. Mil-

ton Murayama, a Japanese laborer who spent his youth on a sugar plantation, wrote about the experience with a frank sense of humor. His slim masterpiece, *All I Asking For Is My Body*, is a graphic account of life on a sugar plantation in the 1920s and '30s. Describing housing for working families on the plantation, for example, he wrote,

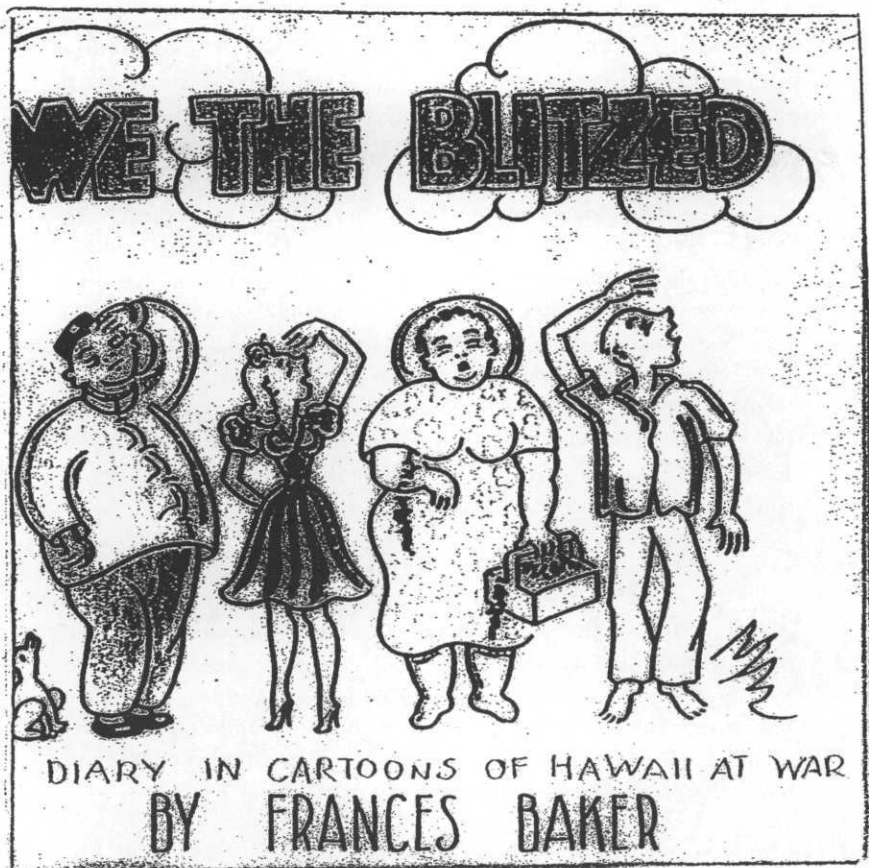
It was a company town with identical company houses and outhouses. . . . The lunas or strawbosses had their own baths and indoor toilets. . . . [but] the place was so country that they [plantation workers] used newspaper for toilet paper, and each outhouse building was partitioned into four toilets. The rough planks used for the partitions did not go up to the rafters, and you could hear all the farts and everything going on in the other toilets. . . . You were so close in fact you could touch the other guy's ass. . . . Every family kept pigs and when the wind stopped blowing or when the warm Kona wind blew from the south, our house smelled like both an outhouse and a pigpen.

Making fun of himself and his pals, Murayama also confesses,

All I could think of day and night was girls, but I shook every time I got near a girl. If you got a Kahana girl pregnant, you had to marry her or your family was disgraced. If you started going with her, pretty soon her parents came to see your parents. The only thing to do was sneak off and see her on the sly. Guys would hide behind hibiscus bushes and meow like cats for the girls to come out. . . .

His humor may offend some readers because of its scatology, but its candid rendering of life on the plantations for those who worked them is its saving grace.<sup>8</sup>

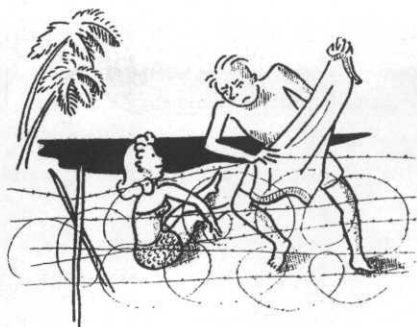
On December 7th, 1941, a decade beyond Murayama's coming of age, Japan catapulted the United States into World War II with a surprise attack on American battleships at Pearl Harbor. The anger that deadly assault produced gave rise not only to a determination to fight back to victory, but also to various ways of coping with the fear the attack had engendered. One of those ways was based on home-made humor. For example, Frances Baker's, *We the Blitzed: A Diary of Cartoons of Hawaii at War*, encouraged the Islanders to chuckle at their own predicament while engaging in America's effort to defeat its enemies.



In reproducing Frances Baker's cartoons, we have taken a step beyond wordplay, wit, sexual innuendo, ethnic jokes, and social satire to introduce the use of humor as a coping mechanism in the Islands. As we proceed, it will become clear that all those forms of lifting spirits are interwoven and that ethnic humor in Hawaii, in the last two or three decades at least, has functioned more as a means of cultivating mutual acceptance than as a divisive force.

By the 1940s, Island folk had ostensibly assumed a stereotypically carefree, "Lucky you live Hawai'i!" attitude—a stark opposite to the





Swimming still is wonderful  
If you know which wires to pull.



Our letters come with censored gaps  
To help keep secrets from the Japs.



The hula gals are typists—so  
Their mamas dance at the U.S.O.



Small rooms we used in that first week  
Before we learned blackout technique.

From: Frances Baker, *We the Blitzed: Diary in Cartoons of Hawaii at War* (Honolulu: Advertiser Publishing Co. Ltd. 1943.) Courtesy of the *Honolulu Advertiser*.

heart-broken anger of the turn-of-the-century Hawaiians when their beloved Islands were annexed by the United States. To what extent the "Lucky you live Hawai'i" attitude may be sincere and to what extent a mere front is hard to determine. It may be sincere for most Island folk today, but the descendents of the original Hawaiians tend to live far below the financial and educational levels of other Hawai'i residents. That fact alone must make it difficult for them to believe that merely living in those beautiful Islands is enough to keep you happy all your life.

Here too, however, their innate sense of humor may play an important part in helping them keep their spirits up. Three other ethnic groups who were either forced out of their homelands or oppressed within them—African Americans, Jews, and Irish—have been capable of rising above those tragic times and become known for the buoyancy of their humor.

Every ethnic group in Hawaii is defined by a stereotype around which local jokes are woven. The Chinese are seen as penny-pinchers; the Japanese as stiff and nerdy; the Portuguese as stupid; the native Hawaiians as lazy; the Samoans as big and tough but not too quick; the Filipinos as lacking a robust sense of humor; and the *haole* as boring and out of touch with their bodily instincts. What distinguishes ethnic humor on these Islands from ethnic humor elsewhere, however, is that it cuts every which way simultaneously. No single group enjoys dominion over all the others and no one has a monopoly on making fun of other groups' idiosyncrasies.

Most Islanders realize that the stereotypes used in their jokes are not to be taken seriously. They are minor characteristics that have been grossly exaggerated, as many a caricaturist has exaggerated a male politician's phony smile or a female celebrity's bust. A joke is a joke, they understand, not a scientific finding.

In teasing each other, not harshly but as friends, and in laughing together in recognition of the fact that each group does indeed have its peculiar traits, Hawai'i residents reinforce their remarkable ability to live together in harmony. Their example shows us how a mixed-race community can function as an extended family—not always getting along, but accepting each other in their common endeavor to conduct meaningful, enjoyable lives.

In the 1950s and '60s, the era following the plantation period and

World War II, Hawai'i's leading comics included Robert Lucky Luck, Kent Bowman, Lippy Espinda, and Sterling Mossman. In 1956, Mossman, Jack Pitman, and Steve Graham created and recorded the popular song, "Don't Dig That Poi." Its lyrics, with their less than tasty take on one of the favorite foods of the Islanders, make many chuckle to this day:

<i>I love a good luau, fine kaukau</i>	<i>Lomi salmon is great.</i>
<i>Pineapple is a joy</i>	<i>I clean my plate, flavor it with soy.</i>
<i>But I wouldn't give a fig</i>	<i>But I don't go big,</i>
<i>I just don't dig that poi</i>	<i>Just don't dig that poi . . .<sup>9</sup></i>

Mossman was a regular at the Barefoot Bar in Waikiki, while Robert (Lucky) Luck, who had been a Marine in World War II, was also an entertainer in Honolulu. He was the emcee for Don Ho in the 60s and played in several episodes of *Hawaii Five-O*.

In 1961, Hula Records recorded Kent Bowman telling pidgin stories for children. He was a legend in Hawaiian comedy, from his character as Hawaiian politician, "K. K. Kaumanua," to his then-risque album, *No Talk Stink*. Here is a verse from his pidgin version of "The Night Before Christmas": "*Da Kine Hawaiian Kalikimaka*."

Was da night befo Christmas an all troo da hale  
 No body was stirring, no even one iole  
 Small ekes was hung on da wall ova deah  
 In de hopes de menehune soon would be heah  
 Small kids was sleepin-up one top one sleeping mat  
 And dey dream about kulolo an tings li dat  
 Mama and me all set fo enjoy one nice res  
 We figa get ten hour moemoe—da bes  
 Den out by da grasses dere been one big clatta  
 Me I jump up fo go look what's da matta . . .<sup>10</sup>

David A. "Lippy" Espinda was born in 1914, the beginning of World War I, and died in 1975 at the age of 61. He owned and operated a service station and used-car lot for 26 years, but was best known for appearances on radio and TV, delivering his used car commercials in pidgin. In the early 1970s, he was emcee of his own show, *Lippy's Lanai Theater*. He appeared on *Hawaii Five-O* and in *Brady Bunch* seg-

ments, but became famous for his gift of the gab and funny nonsense. He was also known as the "King of Pidgin" but called himself, "the poor man's friend."

In the '70s, 80s, and 90s, four gifted performers dominated the field of professional comedy. In the 70s, Lucky Luck hosted one of the most popular television shows in Hawai'i, while Frank DeLima, Andy Bumatai, and the late Rap Replinger were better known as stand-up comics. Men of many voices, all three found inspiration in the speech patterns of their families, friends, and neighbors, and became proficient at mimicking the jargon they heard every day.

Born James Kawika Replinger in 1950, Rap had displayed great promise as a comedian by the time he was in his twenties. He helped create Hawai'i's top comedy ensemble, Booga Booga, with James Grant Benton and Ed Ka'ahea in 1974, performed to enthusiastic audiences in Las Vegas, New York, and Los Angeles, and received an Emmy Award in '82 for his TV special, *Rap's Hawaii*. Tragically, he died in 1984 at the age of 33.

DeLima and Bumatai remain active and influential in the Hawaiian comedy scene today, even though Bumatai moved to California for a number of years in the 1990s. Before the move, he had agreed to take Replinger's place in Booga Booga, recorded his first album, and won a Hoku award (Hawai'i's Grammy) for "Most Promising Artist." He performed successfully in various comedy venues on the mainland, but when his children were old enough to go to school, he and his family moved back to the Islands.

Two features of humor in Hawaii that have existed for many years deserve to be highlighted. One is the readiness of the Islands' comics to make fun of themselves, and the other their inclination to laugh at the stereotypes attached to their ethnic groups without creating hard feelings. The latter—"without creating hard feelings"—is not always true, but it is more often the case in Hawai'i than on the mainland.

Examples of ethnic groups laughing at themselves are not hard to come by. On stage, Kento, a local comic, liked to say, "You may be wondering how a Japanese man like me gets up here to do comedy like this. 'Well, you know how it is. Daddy buys the hotel and here I am.'" Bo Irvine, a "Portagee," recalled the time he was stopped by a local cop for weaving in traffic. Forced to take a sobriety test, he was

afraid he would fail because he was "too dumb to pass." Then to prove that Portuguese people are not really stupid, he recited a line from Shakespeare. "To be or no can be. What was the question?" And most recently and remarkably, a group called the "Extreme Hawaii Fun PIDGIN Team" has put out on their website a piece of in-group ethnic humor called, "HAWAIIAN DRIVERS LICENSE APPLICATION." It contains such questions as,

Last name: \_\_\_\_\_

[If your last name no fit, continue on da other side of da page.]

First name:

☐ Junior

☐ Junior Boy

☐ J.B. (short for Jr. Boy)

☐ Honey Girl

☐ Sista

☐ Bruddah

☐ Sista-Girl

Nationality:

☐ Hawaiian

☐ Popolo

☐ Japanee

☐ Filipino

☐ Haole

☐ Portagee if yes, explain why:

☐ Pake if yes, explain why:

☐ All da above

Edumacation: 1 2 3 4 (Circle highest grade completed) . . .<sup>11</sup>

To my knowledge, it has not produced any angry denunciations, but has been enjoyed by thousands as an inspired example of in-group Island humor.

In contrast, however, some members of ethnic groups have taken umbrage at being stereotyped. The most dramatic reaction of that kind occurred several years ago, when Frank DeLima received threatening messages from a Filipino resident. The man warned DeLima he would kill him if he didn't stop telling those kinds of jokes, and a few years later, when I went to see Frank perform again, it seemed

that he had softened his wit and was directing it more at members of the audience who had come to enjoy his act than at ethnic groups of any kind. It was a wonderful show, as usual, but left me wondering where he might go from there.

A year after that, I learned that DeLima's good friend, Andy Bumatai, had come to his aid by creating a "non-ethnic joke" for Frank to tell.

Three guys walk into a bar and order three beers. Three flies come and land, one into each glass of beer. The first guy, *of no particular ethnicity*, wearing a lime green shirt and purple pants and carrying a dog he calls 'Lunch', sees the fly, is disgusted and pushes the beverage to the side. The second gentleman, *again of no specific ethnicity*, is quietly enjoying a malasada, but he's nervous because he locked his keys in his car . . . the top is down . . . and it might rain. He sees the fly, removes the insect and enjoys his refreshing beverage. The third gentleman, *again of no specific ethnicity*, has two middle names, and who just happens to be the landlord, sees the fly in his beverage, grabs it by the wings and shouts, 'You no steal from me! Spi' it out! Spi' it out!'<sup>12</sup>

In Hawai'i, everyone knows to which ethnic group each character belongs. That's the joke, and it makes a point that not only Bumatai and DeLima agree with, but other stand-ups, knowledgeable commentators on island life, and some UH faculty members as well. As Fred Blake, an anthropology professor at UH Mānoa wrote in an article entitled, "Interethnic Humor in Hawai'i," "Ethnicity is the source of much of Hawaii's unique humor . . . The joking is inter-ethnic in that every group is grist for the local jokes mill . . . The joking is not as much on a particular group as it is on all groups . . . that is to say, the joke is on ethnicity itself."<sup>13</sup> And as standup comic Kehau Jackson (formerly Kehau Baijo) put it, "It is like family teasing, not racism."

Moving beyond ethnic stereotypes in the 1980s, three young men—Douglas Simonson, a.k.a. Peppo, Ken Sakata, and Pat Sasaki—wrote a "here's how we talk in the Islands" booklet called *Pidgin To Da Max*. Within a few years, that highly entertaining work was joined by *Fax To Da Max*, *Hawaii To Da Max*, and other *To Da Max*'s. Enhanced by lively cartoons drawn by Peppo, those colorful compendiums of down-home life introduced outsiders to pidgin, romantic and mari-

tal behavior, legal and illegal business, interesting and useless statistics, and all the ethnic groups that populate the Islands.

They also provided a glance at in-group humor in Hawaii. In *Fax To Da Max* they listed, "The Worst Hawaiian and Polynesian Song Titles," which included, "Lola O'Brien, the Irish Hawaiian," "Yaka Hula Hickey Dula," "I Lost My Sugar in the Sugar Cane," and "I Had To Lova and Leva on the Lava." In *Hawaii To Da Max*, they introduced a "Visitors Guide to Pidgin" that deciphered local expressions from "boddah you?" to "stink eye," and in *Pidgin To Da Max*, they went all out to explain how locals express themselves among themselves. Haole: "He's always making a fool of himself." Pidgin: "He go make ass every time."

Collectively, these books have sold hundreds of thousands of copies, their appeal based not only on the grab-bags of information they supply, but also on the down-home outspokenness they embody.

To do justice to Hawaii's leading comics of the 21st century, Andy Bumatai not only continues to entertain at various clubs and hotels, but also trains up-and-coming comics and gives them opportunities to perform on his shows. He is a thoughtful, insightful man, as is made clear in a note he wrote about ethnic humor in the Islands.

The fundamental difference between what is commonly referred to as 'ethnic humor' and what Hawaiians call 'local humor', is insight into the ethnicity you're zinging. It is impossible to create a stereotype and get a laugh if it does not strike a familiar chord.<sup>14</sup>

Bumatai's ethnic background is Hawaiian, Filipino, French, and German. He delivers monologues as sharp as any of our nationally known stand-ups, yet is able to play a whole set of characters, both male and female, in broad farce. His DVD, *All in the Ohana*, portrays a working-class family who are faced with the threat of losing their home. With astonishing versatility, he plays every member of the family—father, son, mother, daughter, and old, feisty grandmother—carrying it off so well that you find it hard to believe. His recent CD, *Brain Child 2003*, on the other hand, displays his sharp intelligence and ability to see through the smokescreens of our elected leaders.

DeLima, in contrast, is as gifted a singer as he is a comic. His humor is both broad and charming, as in a song by "Abdullah Fataai",

a Samoan wrestler who intimidates whites. "I'm nine feet tall and six feet wide, I got a neck made of elephant hide. I scrape da haoles off the soles of my feet, I drive my Volkswagen from the back seat." *The Best of DeLima*, his 1988 videotape, is a delightful example of his humorous appeal.

Born and raised a devout Catholic, Frank was headed for the priesthood. He spent several years at a seminary, but realized in early adulthood that his vocation would lead him elsewhere. In the introduction to *Frank DeLima's Joke Book*, he tells us what he does when he's not on stage:

I visit every public school in the state of Hawai'i every year, and every private school every two years. . . . I tell the kids that there are three important things in life. . . . The first is to study and read . . . The second is family . . . to respect people, especially those who love and take care of you . . . and the third thing is laughing. I believe that laughter is the key to happiness. It releases pleasure. It makes you feel good. Especially if you can laugh at yourself.<sup>15</sup>

Other talented comics have arisen on the Islands, too. A brief list should include Greg Hammer, Filipino; Bo Irvine, "Portagee" like DeLima; Kehau Baijo, Native Hawaiian; Kento, Japanese; Paul Ogata, Japanese; and Augie Tulba, Filipino.

Here is a monologue Ogata created in the 1990s, featuring his skill at making fun of ethnic groups, especially his own. Noting the mixture of whites, blacks, Asians, and Native Hawaiians in the audience, he observes, "That's the problem. There's too many whites up front and all the Blacks in the back. So Blacks, come on up. Kick a haole off a chair. This is the 90's, you know you can do it." Raising his fist in the Black Power gesture, he continues,

I don't know what that means, but I'm doing it anyway. Black people got together and began to give themselves power and strength. Now two Black people meet on the street and they give each other the sign and say, 'Hey there, you my . . . ' and use the N word. It's a pre-emptive strike. Takes away the power the word used to have. So I'm gonna start doing that with Asians. You should too. Next time you see another Asian person on the street, go right up to them and say, 'Wha's up, man? You my Chink.'



Then he says,

'I have to apologize. It's in the Japanese genetic code. We always apologize. You ever see Japanese tourists? They bump into you, they always say, 'So sorree. My fault, my fault. You could probably give 'em a right hook to the head. So sorree, didn't mean to make you hit me. How's your fist? Good? Okay. Send me doctor bill.'<sup>16</sup>

An upbeat but unassuming young man, Ogata's charm lies in his honesty and simplicity. He makes you laugh and you have to like him, because you know he's a guy whose levity comes naturally and has no other aim than to put a smile on your face.

Augie Tulba, a Filipino in the same age range as Ogata, has a warm, frank, and personal style. Perhaps the most popular comic on the Islands in 2006, Augie T., as he is known, performs primarily to a home crowd, but seems highly appreciated by visitors as well. Since the 1990s, he has been working the local comedy circuit, and has toured the Mainland, Guam, and the Pacific Islands. In 2002, he was named, "Comedian of the Year" by *Midweek* and the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*. About 5'6", handsomely baby-faced with big brown eyes, curly dark hair, and a bit on the stocky side, he is an energetic performer who paces the stage while making fun of himself and everything he has experienced over his lifetime. His performances include take-offs on growing up poor, shopping at Neiman Marcus where the dressing room was "bigger than your living room," and his gay teenaged son. Focusing on his own physique, he tells us that as a Filipino, he is always ushered to a counter where the pants are large at the waist. Turning to tourists who come to Hawaii and "spend dah savings to see dah wadda shooting up from dah rocks," he grabs a bottle of water from a table onstage, gulps the water down and ejects it into the air to give his audience an unforgettable demonstration.

His humor, however, is not all based on body language. Discussing the nation's fear of flying after the 9/11 attack, and focusing on the issue of standing in long lines to be examined for carrying anything that could be used as a weapon, he suggests that we all ride the planes naked—"doz are dah friendly skies."<sup>17</sup>

All those popular performers' humor is indebted to the attributes of the racial groups that populate the Islands, and the fact that only

a few who live there take offense. It is ethnic humor Hawai'i-style, originating with the populace itself and making its way onto the stage. As DeLima put it in an interview in 2003, "I just took what I had been hearing in the streets and turned it into an act."

The humor of the Islands, however, is not restricted to the jokes, stories, and shenanigans of their professional comics. The people who grew up there and live there create and enjoy their own forms of humor. Frank B. Shaner, an admired on-air personality and savvy man, had some interesting observations to make:

The humor of Hawaii, crosses all lines. I was born and raised here, and when I went to the mainland for the first time, I couldn't believe how the blacks and whites were at each others' throats. Over here we've got Spanish, Tahitians, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and many other ethnic groups, and we appreciate their food, their music, their dialect. We listen to it and enjoy it. We accept each other, we can embrace each other. We're always extending greetings, bringing flowers, giving flower leis. It's a feeling of every one living together. We all 'talk story' about each other, and the humor of the Islands is what binds us. We live on an island, so we have to learn to live and let live, and laughing helps us do it.<sup>18</sup>

Many articles have appeared in local newspapers, and studies have been made by social scientists, to shed light on the interrelations of the Islands' inhabitants. In 1992, Michael Haas, who taught political science at UH, wrote a working paper in which he addressed the fact that Hawai'i, "has a worldwide reputation as a paragon of ethnic relations." While not uncritical of such acclaim, Haas agreed that, "The view that Hawaii is exemplary in ethnic relations does receive support from most observers." Ascribing this happy circumstance in large part to the "aloha spirit," Haas described that spirit as including, "Giving others a warm welcome . . . leaving no one out . . . respect for other ethnic groups . . . and a fine art of banter in which everyone learns how to tease through ethnic humor (and) stereotypes of one's own group are seen as fair game for gentle and harmless ribbing."<sup>19</sup>

In 1996, an editorial in the *Honolulu Advertiser* ended with the news that, "The most recent 'Hawaii Poll' asked Island residents about the status of the statement, 'In Hawaii, people of different ethnic and

racial backgrounds get along better than almost anywhere else.' An overwhelming 83 percent agreed."<sup>20</sup> In 1998, however, another article in the *Advertiser* took a different slant on the matter. "Ethnic Slang Veers Into Perilous Territory", written by Dan Nakaso, begins with the news that,

Comedian Frank DeLima has felt the forces of political correctness gathering in Hawaii for the past ten years. He still trades in ethnic humor, but won't go near some of the jokes he used to tell. . . . In the past year, a few people, Filipinos in particular, have written letters of protest to radio stations and clubs about some of DeLima's material.

Nakaso goes on to report that the governor's use of the term *pōpolo* to refer to dark-skinned people during Black History Month incurred a negative reaction. He mentions the fact that in Kailua two African American students filed a \$14 million lawsuit because a school yearbook included the caption, "I like pig feet. I like hog miliz!" under a photograph of African American students. He includes a quote from Peter Manicus, University of Hawai'i's Liberal Studies Director, "You can call it a Los Angelesification of Hawaii" but ends with a quote from Noreen Kinzler, a Hawai'i resident whose five year-old son—Caucasian and Jewish—attended a private Episcopalian school where most students were Asian and Christian. In response to the boy's concern that people thought, "It's bad to be Jewish," his mother explained, "one religion is not good or another bad. Just different." "Relax," she added. "It'll be OK. It's Hawaii."<sup>21</sup>

Whether her optimism was justified remains to be seen. The spirit of political correctness that has done so much to oppose discrimination and insist on respect and equality in the relations of men and women, blacks and whites, has—ironically—put a damper on free expression of thought and the kinds of humor of which it disapproves.

As a result, PC had no sooner swept the nation in the 90s than it itself became the butt of jokes and parodies. For example, in *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*, Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf explain such politically correct terms as "Cerebrally challenged" (Stupid.) Example: "Move it, cerebrally challenged!" shouted the cab driver; "Differently sized" (Fat); and "H'orsh'it": (An artful

contraction of "he or she or it", offered by Joel Forbes as a gender free pronoun.)<sup>22</sup>

Humor is flexibility's twin, while political correctness, for all its virtues, contains a streak of rigidity too obvious to be ignored. Most Americans, in Hawai'i as elsewhere support fairness, respect and equality, but also lay claim to freedom of speech. The latter easily translates into freedom to make fun of whatever or whomever one wishes. The fact that no single race or religion rules all the others today may well be the basic reason for their getting along as well as they do, but their easy access to their senses of humor also appears to be a more crucial factor than has been recognized.

Pidgin, the language created by the immigrant laborers in Hawaii to help them communicate with one another, is a humorous tongue, not a polite one. Like Ebonics for Blacks and Yinglish for Jews, it helps draw its users together by endorsing their inclination to amuse themselves and each other. But let's not get carried away. Humor is not the only factor keeping the Islands' inhabitants in friendly moods. The economy of the Islands is largely dependent on tourism, which entails a welcoming attitude toward the hundreds of thousands of visitors they accommodate year round. Add to that the fact that, while incomes vary from subsistence levels to opulence, many live comfortable lives and their home is truly a tropical paradise, and it seems that if anywhere human beings could be capable of goodwill, it should be here.

The relation between those fortunate conditions, the aloha spirit, and the humor the Islands' residents have cultivated for centuries appears to be one of reciprocal influence. Humor and goodwill, like hugs and affection, tend to reinforce each other. A certain amount of friction between members of different groups of all sorts may be inevitable, but that friction, in Hawai'i, seems to be overshadowed by hospitality.

One of the things the residents of those Islands have to teach the rest of us is that humor—even ethnic humor—can be a friendly way of expressing affection for one another, not a form of demeaning attack. Most of us feel as protective of our ethnicity as we do of our families. It is as basic a part of who we are, as is our masculinity or femininity. As we all know that anti-Semitism and prejudice against Blacks, Indians, Chicanos and other ethnic groups have sponsored

unfairness and viciousness on the part of racists, it is no wonder that many members of ethnic groups are highly sensitive to any suggestion that their group may be even slightly flawed. But we are all less than perfect as individual human beings, so how could the groups to which we belong be faultless?

The challenge is to differentiate between ethnic slurs in jokes' clothing and ethnic jokes as they exist in Hawai'i: a mostly-friendly form of kidding each other by unveiling one's own and each other's frailties. The difference between ethnic jokes and ethnic slurs is the difference between a pat on the *tush* and a kick in the butt.

What the residents of Hawai'i have to teach us in general is even more important. All the foregoing evidence of humor in Hawai'i, from its earliest days to the 21st century, suggests that, faced with threatening or disastrous situations, the Hawai'i populace might be inclined to use their sense of humor to keep their spirits up. And in fact, that appears to be precisely the case.

Dr. Sandra Ritz, a mental health professional who worked for the U.S. Disaster Mental Health Service, was living in Honolulu in September, 1992, when Hurricane 'Iniki devastated the island of Kaua'i. She was assigned to help the survivors in the aftermath, and fortunately, kept a first-hand account of their use of humor in coping with their predicament.

When the last winds ceased blowing, they left behind a widespread path of destruction and devastation. There were eight deaths and many injuries. Over 5,000 utility poles were down, blocking the roads and cutting off all communication, power, and water. Nearly 70 percent of Kauai's 22,000 homes suffered damage. Over 7,000 residents were homeless and another 8,000 were in need of food and water. The entire Island was disrupted and there was no place to go.

Nevertheless, in counseling and working side-by-side with the survivors for the next 12 months, Dr. Ritz was a frequent witness to their spontaneous humor. As she was also a humor scholar, she kept notes and made quick sketches during her breaks to record what she had heard.

Walking out of a shelter for the first time, one survivor reported that she had 'laughed through my tears' when a fellow occupant said,

'Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore.' Another survivor philosophized, 'I've always wanted a long vacation. Now I've got it,' while yet another observed that Iniki had solved his packrat problem.

There were frequent jokes about the pursuit of ice to keep food-stuff fresh and the steep price in items that were now in great demand. One fake advertisement, however, announced, "At Itchitachi Quickie Market we haven't raised our prices. They were always this high!"

Another sign read: "Iniki: One Hell of a Blowjob." Two female survivors said they were "not satisfied" by the military's "premature evacuation." And a man whose house had been demolished with only the front door left intact, propped up the door and attached a sign reading, "Open house."

The spontaneous use of humor in response to the hurricane's devastation seemed, to Dr. Ritz, an example of Hawai'i's residents' ability to cope with life's difficulties—even the worst—by bouncing back with a spirit-lifting outlook.<sup>23</sup>

The Islands' inhabitants' ability to keep their spirits up by laughing at themselves and each other was a capacity their ancestors had developed long before any *haole* ship had arrived at their shores. New England missionaries may have induced them to adopt a white man's religion, but they never absorbed the stiffness that went along with it. Their inclination today, to enjoy making fun of themselves and each other, had its roots in their homeland's primeval civilization. We can thank their inherent inclination to relish jokes of all kinds for the laughter and goodwill we too can share, not only in response to the performances of those talented comics who entertain us in Waikiki, but on all the streets and shores of the beautiful Islands of Hawai'i.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Now dat da book pau, dis is what I went tink of da guy who wen write em. Da guy should get da Peace Prize. Cuz I wen try read em, and da buggah wen put me to sleep. Nah nah nah, only joke. Harvey one smart guy, but. Can tell cuz he wen use plenny hybolic words. He wen ask me for say dat he get choke mahalos for Sascha Zimmerman, Suzy Schepps, Wanda Adams, Linda Menton, and Paul Ogata. When

you one mindless writer, I guess need plenny help. (Paul Ogata, personal communication, 2006.)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A. Grove Day and Carl Stroven, eds. *A Hawaiian Reader* (Honolulu: Mutual Publishing, 1984, c1959) 31.
- <sup>2</sup> Martha Beckwith, "Hawaiian Riddling," *American Anthropologist* 24 (1922): 311-14.
- <sup>3</sup> Manulani Meyer, personal communication to author, 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> Lilikalā K. Kame'eiehiwa, *Mo'olelo ka'ao o Kamapua'a, A Legendary Tradition of Kamapua'a, the Hawaiian Pig-God* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1996) x-xiii. See also Steven Goldsberry, *Maui the Demigod: An Epic Novel of Mythical Hawaii* (Honolulu: U Hawaii P, 1989, c1984); Vivian Thompson, *Hawaiian Legends of Tricksters and Riddlers* (New York: Holiday House, 1969); Vivian Thompson, *Maui-Full-of Tricks: A Legend of Old Hawaii* (San Carlos, CA: Golden Gate Junior Books, 1970); and W. D. Westervelt. *Legends of Maui: A Demi-God of Polynesia and of his Mother Hina* (New York: AMS Press, 1979).
- <sup>5</sup> Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time* (Honolulu: U P of Hawai'i, 1968) 54.
- <sup>6</sup> Daws 58.
- <sup>7</sup> Daws 105.
- <sup>8</sup> Milton Murayama, *All I Asking For Is My Body* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P) 29, 61.
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.squareone.org/Hapa/d13.html>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://bruce.howard.org/ke-ahihi-mamua-o-kalidikimaka.html>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.extreme-hawaii.com/pidgin/funkine/driver/>
- <sup>12</sup> Andy Bumatai, personal communication to author, 2004.
- <sup>13</sup> Fred Blake, *The Comic in the Culture*, "Interethnic Humor in Hawaii," (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Summer Session Catalog, 1996).
- <sup>14</sup> Andy Bumatai, personal communication to author, 2003.
- <sup>15</sup> Frank DeLima, *Frank DeLima's Joke Book* (Honolulu: Bess Press, 1991) vi-vii.
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Ogata, excerpt from comedy routine, 2004.
- <sup>17</sup> Augie Tulba, *Augie Tulba Live @Hawai'i Theatre*, DVD, Honolulu: Mountain Apple, 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> Frank B. Shaner, personal interview with author, 2003.
- <sup>19</sup> Michael Haas, *The Hawaiian Multicultural Ethos: What is it and How Did it Develop?* (Honolulu: Center for Research on Ethnic Relations, Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 1992) 1-3.
- <sup>20</sup> "Getting Along Hawaii's Strongest Asset," *HA*, May 19, 1996.
- <sup>21</sup> "Ethnic Slang Veers into Perilous Territory," *HA*, Mar. 9, 1998.
- <sup>22</sup> Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf, *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* (New York: Villard Books, 1993) 10-29.
- <sup>23</sup> Sandra Ritz, personal interview with author, 2001.

